

## Inuit gender parity and why it was not accepted in the Nunavut legislature

### La parité chez les Inuit et pourquoi elle n'a pas été acceptée dans la législature du Nunavut

Laakkuluk Jessen Williamson

Volume 30, numéro 1, 2006

Problématiques des sexes  
Gender issues

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/016149ar>  
DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/016149ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

#### Éditeur(s)

Association Inuksiutiit Katimajit Inc.  
Centre interuniversitaire d'études et de recherches autochtones (CIÉRA)

#### ISSN

0701-1008 (imprimé)  
1708-5268 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

#### Citer cet article

Williamson, L. J. (2006). Inuit gender parity and why it was not accepted in the Nunavut legislature. *Études/Inuit/Studies*, 30(1), 51–68.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/016149ar>

#### Résumé de l'article

Cet article concerne les circonstances historiques qui ont mené au plébiscite non exécutoire de 1997 sur la parité des sexes dans ce qui allait devenir le Nunavut. D'abord, la tradition égalitariste et la fluidité des genres dans la culture Inuit y sont décrites en y apportant les exemples des valeurs instillées dans la langue, le système d'attribution des noms, la répartition sexuée des rôles et la sexualité. Ensuite, nous prenons en considération les circonstances politiques entourant l'instauration du Nunavut ainsi que la manière dont la question des sexes se joue au niveau politique. Les obstacles opposés aux femmes dans le système électoral sont analysés, de même que sont évalués les arguments élaborés à l'encontre de la création de la parité. Nous réfléchissons au vote sur la parité et aux raisons pour lesquelles celle-ci fut finalement rejetée. Dans la deuxième partie, nous observons attentivement la manière dont de nombreuses organisations extérieures au gouvernement interagissent lorsqu'elles abordent les problèmes relatifs au genre. Nous mettons en contraste des groupements politiques et artistiques qui représentent les femmes du Nunavut avec une organisation qui véhicule des voix d'hommes inuit, mais n'en représente pas l'ensemble. Paradoxalement, les hommes inuit conservent de loin une plus grande représentation à l'assemblée législative du Nunavut alors qu'au niveau social ils souffrent davantage que les femmes, elles-mêmes plus stables économiquement. L'article se termine par une discussion sur le futur des problématiques des sexes au Nunavut tenant compte des opinions de jeunes Inuit sur ce sujet.

# Inuit gender parity and why it was not accepted in the Nunavut legislature

---

Laakkuluk Jessen Williamson\*

**Résumé:** La parité chez les Inuit et pourquoi elle n'a pas été acceptée dans la législature du Nunavut

Cet article concerne les circonstances historiques qui ont mené au plébiscite non exécutoire de 1997 sur la parité des sexes dans ce qui allait devenir le Nunavut. D'abord, la tradition égalitariste et la fluidité des genres dans la culture Inuit y sont décrites en y apportant les exemples des valeurs instillées dans la langue, le système d'attribution des noms, la répartition sexuée des rôles et la sexualité. Ensuite, nous prenons en considération les circonstances politiques entourant l'instauration du Nunavut ainsi que la manière dont la question des sexes se joue au niveau politique. Les obstacles opposés aux femmes dans le système électoral sont analysés, de même que sont évalués les arguments élaborés à l'encontre de la création de la parité. Nous réfléchissons au vote sur la parité et aux raisons pour lesquelles celle-ci fut finalement rejetée. Dans la deuxième partie, nous observons attentivement la manière dont de nombreuses organisations extérieures au gouvernement interagissent lorsqu'elles abordent les problèmes relatifs au genre. Nous mettons en contraste des groupements politiques et artistiques qui représentent les femmes du Nunavut avec une organisation qui véhicule des voix d'hommes inuit, mais n'en représente pas l'ensemble. Paradoxalement, les hommes inuit conservent de loin une plus grande représentation à l'assemblée législative du Nunavut alors qu'au niveau social ils souffrent davantage que les femmes, elles-mêmes plus stables économiquement. L'article se termine par une discussion sur le futur des problématiques des sexes au Nunavut tenant compte des opinions de jeunes Inuit sur ce sujet.

**Abstract:** Inuit gender parity and why it was not accepted in the Nunavut legislature

In this article, the historical circumstances that led up to the 1997 non-binding plebiscite on gender parity in what was soon-to-be Nunavut are considered. Firstly, traditional gender egalitarianism and fluidity in Inuit culture are described and exemplified by the values instilled in language, naming system, gendered roles and sexuality. Then, the political circumstances around the establishment of Nunavut and the way gender is played out on a political level are taken into account. The barriers against women in the electoral system are analysed and the arguments made for and against creating gender parity are evaluated. The vote on gender parity and the reasons why gender parity was finally rejected are reflected on. In the second part, the manners in which various organisations outside of government interact in order to address gender issues are scrutinised. Political and artistic bodies that represent women within Nunavut are contrasted against an organisation that contains Inuit men's voices, but does not represent them. Paradoxically, Inuit men still garner far more representation in the Legislative Assembly of Nunavut while at the social level they suffer more than women who are themselves more

---

\* P.O. Box 11576, Iqaluit, Nunavut, Canada, X0A 1H0. laakkuluk@gmail.com

economically stable. The article ends with a discussion on the future of gender issues in Nunavut including the views held amongst Inuit youth on the topic.

---

## Introduction

In 1997, the Nunavut Implementation Committee suggested that a two-member constituency system should be instituted in Nunavut's future electoral process, allowing for one woman and one man to be elected from each constituency (Nunavut Implementation Commission 1995). The issue was put to a non-binding plebiscite and was voted down by 57% (Dahl 1997). In 1999, Nunavut was established as a one-member constituency system, with 19 constituencies and no gender guidelines (*ibid.*). Only two women were elected in 2004 (Elections Nunavut 2004).

The possibility of gender parity within the Nunavut Legislature has been an interesting debate in the establishment of a modern indigenous authority. Whereas Inuit once led a nomadic life based on egalitarian principles and close-knit family, modern Inuit have undergone a tremendous amount of change in the past 50 years to become an emerging political power. Nunavut's government intends to work toward combining Western political infrastructure with traditional knowledge. It reflects how "Inuit have had to adapt their beliefs and behaviours relating to governance, while at the same time attempting to adjust them to suit their needs" (Gombay 2000: 136). This paper argues that gender parity would have been a concise representation of the intersection of Inuit egalitarianism with a Western electoral system.

This paper was written as a major project for a senior level undergraduate class called "The History of Canadian Women in the Twentieth Century," taught by Dr. Lisa Young at University of Calgary. The data presented is based on a review of published and unpublished sources and interviews by the author. In-person interviews with Inuit youth took place in Ottawa, February 16-23, 2004. The youth included four women and six men between the ages of 17 and 30. Jack Hicks, former Director of the Department of Statistics for the Government of Nunavut and a former staff member of the Nunavut Implementation Committee, was also interviewed (by telephone on March 12, 2004).

## Inuit *qaujimajatuqangit* on gender relations

Inuit relate to their past and pass knowledge and skills down through the generations by means of oral tradition. In the dialects of Inuktitut that my informants speak, it is called *qaujimajatuqangit* and is generally translated as "traditional knowledge." According to my informants, *qaujimajatuqangit* is a concept that encapsulates history, philosophy and observations of the world surrounding Inuit, and a way of life that is continuous between the past and the present. While it includes the use of Inuktitut, many Nunavummiut ("people of Nunavut") insist that it has to go beyond language. Although *qaujimajatuqangit* has allowed Inuit to survive and thrive in the Arctic for thousands of years, it has been neglected as a Western government

provided new mechanisms for survival and societal structure. Inuit are looking for ways that combine *qaujimajatuqangit* with the new Nunavut governmental structure, in order to appropriate government power. The gender equality debate is deeply embedded in this struggle and commitment. As Gombay (2000: 133) puts it: "if traditional gender relations may be characterised by mutual respect and complementarity, similar characteristics may be found in Inuit ideals of governance." It is thus important to describe what *qaujimajatuqangit* has to say about gender relations before analysing the cultural and political consequences of legislative gender parity in the contemporary world.

*Qaujimajatuqangit* establishes gender equality in several fundamental ways. It respects the balance between gender roles, the importance of family, and the fluidity of both gender and sexuality. *Qaujimajatuqangit* also addresses the genderless quality of both the language and naming system. There is no gender in Inuktitut grammar, and the only way it can be expressed is through lexicon (Dorais 1986). One cannot tell the gender of either the subject or the direct object in a sentence. For example, the Greenlandic word *una* translates as either "she" or "he" or "it." A sentence such as "*takuvaatit*" is translated as "he/she/it is looking at you." One usually gleans the gender from the context of the conversation. The Inuit naming system is also genderless (Nuttall 1992: 67). My own name, Laakkuluk, is an example of this. Before I was born, my father promised my mother's family that I would be named after a little boy in an Inuktitut song. There was no incongruity when I was born a girl. Names are of utmost importance because they not only link a person with elements of the universe, but also with members of the extended community and with people who share the name, both in the past and in the present (Jessen Williamson 2000: 135). Namesakes are said to share the same soul and are therefore endowed with similar characteristics (*ibid.*: 136-137). This means that, regardless of gender, one is empowered by the cosmic nature of a soul in a way that links one with both biological kin and the community at large.

### ***Traditional gender roles***

Traditionally, Inuit men and women were defined by what they did. For the Inuit, "to be human is to assume an implicit obligation to perform the various sorts of work that is conventionally associated with one's gender and to perform that work for the benefit of members of the opposite gender" (Guemple 1986: 21). Women maintained the household, while men hunted. They worked symbiotically, viewing each other's work as a devotion to one another (Condon and Stern 1991: 391-392). In an environment that could be dangerous and unforgiving, co-operation as a family unit was necessary for both survival and the development of identity and culture.

Minor (2002: 71) describes the roles played by men and women in the traditional sphere as different, but equal. When it came to political decisions, all members of the community came together to form a consensus. While everyone's opinion was valued, elders had the most authority because of their life experience. Elders were often consulted to resolve political difficulties, and it was immaterial whether the elder was a woman or a man (*ibid.*: 72).

Equal gender authority in traditional Inuit culture is a matter of debate, both within and outside Inuit society. Many contemporary Inuit women themselves contend that men had ultimate authority in traditional times (Reimer 1996: 82). However, the view of the past has been subjectively altered by Western assimilation (including religion). Many Inuit and non-Inuit accept patriarchal biases or assumptions about Inuit uncritically, while I argue that a unique balance between male and female authority existed.

### *The pliability of gender roles*

While gender roles were delineated, these roles were not strictly held. If a woman was inclined to hunt, or forced to out of necessity, there was nothing forbidding her from doing so. If a man was drawn to tending the household or the situation called for it, his presence was accepted there (Rojas 2000: 65). A number of female hunters, past and present, are renowned for their skill. There are also instances of male midwives (Reimer 1996: 81). As Gombay (2000: 131) writes, “the fuzziness [of gender roles] comes in trying to assert that these responsibilities were fixed, and in trying to assign significance to them.” When examining hunter-gatherer societies, it is easy to abridge gender roles into simple forms, when in fact the way men and women interact is quite complicated (*ibid.*).

Inuit oral history has many stories about men and women crossing various barriers into the opposite gender’s domain. One story from Greenland is of a baby’s father who willed himself to lactate after his wife suddenly died. Out of resolve and love, he was able to save the life of his child by doing what seems utterly impossible (Karla Jessen Williamson, pers. comm. 2004). Another Greenlandic story is of an old woman who decided to live as a hunter. She married her daughter-in-law, eventually transformed into a man, and they had a child together (Stewart 2002: 19). Homosexuality has never been uncommon, although the full acceptance of it is another matter. Some Inuit communities did not mind same-sex couples, as long as they could provide for themselves, while others (particularly among small populations) discouraged them for the sake of procreation (Karla Jessen Williamson, pers. comm. 2004).

Many groups across the Inuit world have brought up certain children as though they were the opposite sex, because of unusual spiritual circumstances such as the divination that the child was born with the wrong sex, the need to disguise the child from evil spirits, to communicate with a namesake, or to strengthen the child from an ailment. Usually, when the child reached puberty, he or she would revert to their biological sex (Stewart 2002: 14-20).

### *The malleability of sexuality*

Since my early adolescence, I have been studying and performing an Inuit mask dance called *uaajeerneq*. It is based on *ilisimasatoqqat* or Greenlandic traditional knowledge. I learned this dance from my Greenlandic mother, Karla Jessen Williamson, and a Greenlandic actor named Maariu Olsen. The performance is an

improvised and interactive clown act that is highly sexualised and both scary and funny. The performer (female or male) covers her face with black paint and red and white designs. She inserts bones into her cheeks, distorting her facial features. Black symbolises acknowledging the humility of human intelligence compared to the vastness of the universe. White symbolises the bones of the ancestors who have given life. Red represents the vulva and the cheek bulges represent testes. The performer might stuff her clothes in odd places, so that her body is odd-looking. Sometimes the costume purposely confuses genders—the performer looks pregnant but hangs a phallus between her legs or has all the attributes of a man but seemingly has breasts. Other times the costume accentuates the performer’s own breasts or penis. The performance begins with the dancer surprising her audience by jumping out of the darkness and literally pouncing on people. She speaks strangely, makes animal sounds and behaves erratically—anything that charges the atmosphere with sexuality, fear and hilarity.

The whole point of the performance is to relish human sexuality, to teach children and adults alike about fear and taboo, and to allow people to laugh away tension. It is a cultural statement on interpersonal relations. Fundamentally, this dance proclaims Inuit values of egalitarianism. It confronts gender issues in society and allows an individual to meditate on how to engage with others according to cultural ideals. Physically bringing that sexualised mixture of laughter and fear into the political realm is a difficult matter. Thus recently I was invited to perform *uaajeerneq* at the opening ceremonies of a session in the Nunavut Legislature, but it was decided that the dance was too provocative for such a solemn occasion.

According to Guemple (1986: 22), Inuit understand sexuality as a legitimate and mandatory part of the society. Marriage between a man and a woman is not seen as a social contract for fidelity and sexual access, as it is in many Western cultures, but is instead based on the need to divide labour; it is a “union of skills” (*ibid.*). Guemple (1986: 17-18) argues that this focus creates a permissive understanding about sexuality. This is evidenced by that fact that no children are “illegitimate,” knowledge about sexual matters is openly shared with children and sexual activity amongst youth is not frowned upon (*ibid.*: 20-22).

Over the years of performing *uaajeerneq*, I have developed my own understanding of the basics that underlie Inuit philosophy on gender and sexuality: Humanity is built from one common duality. Within every man there is something womanly, and within every woman there is something manly. In other words, both genders share common space within one person, but one is projected more than the other. A person’s essential character does not change because of the superficial confines of sex. Men and women are never only heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual; most lie somewhere along a continuum.

### **The making of Nunavut and the gender parity proposal**

Nunavut was established on April 1, 1999, according to Article Four of the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement (NLCA). The NLCA is the outcome of a political

negotiation process between Inuit and the federal government that has taken place since the mid-1970s. Only beneficiaries belong to the NLCA, although anyone can reside in Nunavut—all people have the same access to social and political rights (Dahl 1997: 1-2). Beneficiaries are usually Inuit. A person becomes a beneficiary either by birth or by the consensus of the community. In Nunavut, the focus of most politics is on Inuit issues since Inuit form 85% of the population (*ibid.*). NLCA beneficiaries have ownership rights to 18% of Nunavut's land, which includes 10% ownership of subsoil resources, and special hunting and fishing rights throughout the territory (*ibid.*). It means, however, that the federal government still has control and ownership of 82% of the land.

The Nunavut government is based on the Westminster parliamentary system and uses single-member plurality to elect its legislators. Its major difference from other such systems is that it is non-partisan. There are no political parties in Nunavut; once legislators are elected, they operate on consensus to reach decisions (White 2001: 84). While in many ways this is a well thought way of combining a Western structure with indigenous values, White (2001: 86) points out that consensus can lead to backroom deals, factionalism, favouritism and policy incoherence. Many of my informants indicated that unless an Inuk politician has had a lot of practice in doing Westminster style politics and is highly proficient in English, it is very difficult to successfully navigate through the political procedure. Although the majority of members in the legislature are Inuit and its policies are more or less oriented toward Inuit, it is still not Inuit enough for the general population to feel comfortable with it. Furthermore, women are completely under-represented in the legislature. Yet, during the making of Nunavut, the idea of equal gender representation was once seriously considered as will be seen below.

### ***The Nunavut Implementation Committee and the gender parity debate***

The Nunavut Implementation Committee (NIC) was an advisory group part of Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated (NTI). NTI was the official body that negotiated the shape of Nunavut with the government of Northwest Territories (NWT) and the Canadian federal government, through the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND). When the NIC first discussed the design of the Nunavut government in 1995, it saw the perfect opportunity to combine the issues of regional and gender representation.

Prior to the establishment of Nunavut, there was a Nunavut caucus within the Northwest Territories (NWT) government that had 10 representatives (or MLAs; Members of the Legislative Assembly). It was decided that 10 was far too small a number to base an entire government on, because it was possible that the majority of the legislature, if not the whole legislature, could comprise the cabinet and the legislature would thereby lose its objectivity (Nunavut Implementation Committee 1995: A-8.2). If party politics were adopted, the small number of MLAs would be even more dangerous. It was agreed that the Nunavut legislature would comprise at least 15 to 20 MLAs. NIC determined that if it kept the NWT constituency boundaries, plus one more to include the district of Sanikiluaq, and had two members per constituency for a



total of 22 MLAs, Nunavut would have a smoothly run and cost-effective legislature (*ibid.*). With two MLAs per district, they could time-share sitting in the legislature, so that the constituents would have more time with their elected member and still have representation. The MLAs themselves would have an easier time balancing family with work and travel (*ibid.*: A-8.3). This is where the idea of gender parity stepped in. Ron Irwin, Minister of DIAND at the time, agreed with John Amagoalik—one of the founding politicians of Nunavut and an NIC member—and NTI very soon into the debate and pushed for gender parity to be accepted (Jack Hicks, pers. comm. 2004). Amagoalik (1997) wanted to make women a priority in the new government and saw a clear link between gender parity and traditional culture.

Jack Hicks, who was a staff member of the NIC and highly involved in the gender parity proposal, said that introducing something as “radical” as gender parity is easier to do at the beginning of creating a government since after that the government is more or less set. According to him, the NIC would have suggested gender parity even if gender equality had not been a part of Inuit culture, because having equal numbers of men and women in the legislature is simply a matter of fairness. Gombay (2000: 137) comments that the proposal seems to have been offered as a “wholly rational and seemingly culture-free format.” She adds, however, that the debate over the proposal concentrated almost solely on culture, suggesting perhaps a disconnection between the NIC and the public (*ibid.*). Based on the research the NIC did on women’s representation all around the world, they found that not one country had achieved anything near to parity despite any of (or perhaps because of) the various electoral systems that were in place. The NIC saw comparisons between women’s under-representation and the lack of attention to areas such as daycare, healthcare, education and sexuality rights (Nunavut Implementation Committee 1995: A-8.4-8.7).

Young (1997) points out that gender parity in a two-member constituency model enhances the democracy of a legislature because it doubles the points of interest a voter has to choose from. A voter in a certain geographical location does not necessarily share the same opinions as other voters within that location, just as one does not agree with all women because one happens to be a woman. If voting according to geography is a one-dimensional point of access to representation, then voting according to both gender and geography augments the point of political access to a two-dimensional approach (*ibid.*: 309-310). Young also discusses how various electoral systems and mechanisms in conventional Western politics affect the number of women in government. For financial reasons, competitiveness and individualism, Western governments tend to favour men. Young states that a range of reform is needed in order to increase the number of women in government. She suggests that instituting gender parity is an excellent way of remedying the lack of female representation in the legislature.

An interesting addition to the discussion is Article 23 of the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement which states that government at all levels of hierarchy (both territorial and federal) must employ a representational level of Inuit in the territory (Nunavut Land Claims Agreement 1993). This means that because more than 4/5 of Nunavut’s population is Inuit, at least 4/5 of the governmental work force must be Inuit (Nunavut



Tunngavik Incorporated 2004: 47). That Inuit employment levels were such a concern demonstrates that Nunavummiut saw the need for a controlled method of correcting inequality. Without such a mechanism, low Inuit employment levels may either stay the same or worsen. Drawing a parallel to gender parity, without an institutionalised mechanism to correct the under-representation of women there may never be gender equality. Since Nunavummiut were willing to implement Article 23, it should not have been a stretch to implement equality between men and women.

Some proponents against gender parity in Nunavut thought it provided a crutch to women, to the disadvantage of others who do not need institutionalised means to reach the top (Phillips 1997). MP Nancy Karetak-Lindell described the situation this way: “I don’t know if I would want to be one of those 19 women who [...] would be constantly reminded that, ‘Oh we’re only here because they let us be.’ I didn’t know whether a woman would ever feel that it was their rightful place to be” (Hill 2001: 3). Gender parity would not have been a crutch, just as Article 23 is not a hand up. Both are institutionalised devices used to alleviate systemic barriers against women.

Another anti-gender parity force was the NWT Minister Responsible for the Status of Women, Maniok Thomson (Jack Hicks, pers. comm. 2004). She was one of the two female NWT ministers at the time. Thomson is from Kivalliq, where most of the “no” voters also came from. Her main argument was that gender parity only let her compete against other female politicians, while she felt she was a much better politician than many of the men in Northern politics. Moreover, Thomson several times asserted that there were no such things as gender issues or women’s issues. She continually questioned the democracy of the proposal as it “discriminated” against women. She also stated that a two-member constituency system was not cost-effective.

### *The 1997 plebiscite*

Amagoalik (1997: 9) forebodingly wrote in the last part of the campaign before the plebiscite: “How the vote turns out will largely reveal what kind of society we are.” The vote, held on May 26, 1997, was 57% against the proposal and only 39% of eligible voters turned out (Dahl 1997). There are numerous reasons for both the weak rejection and the low turnout of voters. Perhaps there was a feeling that it was pushed too hard by the NIC. The public resented being told how to vote (Bourgeois 1997). Some questioned whether it was really a legitimate suggestion if people outside of Nunavut made it (Dahl 1997). It has also been suggested that Nunavut was intimidated to do something that no one else in the world has tried. But if so, White (2001) calls this a lack of imagination on the part of the electorate. Others said that gender parity went against tradition and the Bible (though there were arguments for gender parity using the same tradition and Bible) (Dahl 1997). Gombay (2000: 137-140) surmises that Nunavummiut were held back in their understanding of the political process by a lack of experience, but because the vote was marked by silence at the polls and a weak rejection of the proposal, it is not easy to pinpoint what exactly happened. Gombay puts forward that the Inuit notion of non-interference in governance is evident. She concludes that the Inuit public either did not like or did not understand what the political elite were doing and punished them with what seemed to be a lack of interest.

Another suggestion is that the low turnout was due to the timing of it. In May, many families leave the permanent communities to hunt and fish—they did not want to miss the opportunity to be on the land (Dahl 1997). Jack Hicks (pers. comm. 2004) believes that if the plebiscite had been held later in the spring, the tides would have turned in favour of parity. He suggests that people were turned off by the bitter and sometimes ugly debate in what had been an otherwise smooth transition into a new territory. People thought this was dirty politics, something they did not want to get involved in. He also notes that when gender parity became an active issue, the NWT decided to step into the arena and derail the Nunavut train. They were a powerful influence that led to the ruin of the gender parity proposal. I think that people ceded their right to choose because they did not understand what was happening in the first place. Many of my informants told me that Nunavut's history is not taught in the schools and although most people are familiar with the idea of formal politics, they do not understand the mechanisms of government.

As Nunavut develops into an established territory, it is a time of creativity. As Gombay (2000: 128) puts it, "in the process of setting up the infrastructure of the new territory, [Nunavummiut] are also forging new identities." Traditional egalitarianism does not go in tandem with modern-day competitive individualism, and this makes it difficult for men and women to take on modern roles of authority and governance (*ibid.*: 133). While gender parity has paramount merit on its own, it is both serendipitous and empowering to men and women that Inuit culture already bears the capability to let people work together both because of their gender and regardless of their gender. It is therefore deeply disappointing that gender parity was not adopted into Nunavut legislature.

### **The gender situation in Nunavut**

As with all societies dealing with the effects of colonisation, Inuit society suffers from a great deal of social malaise. Nunavut is no exception. This is an intensely complex situation, with men worse off in some areas and women in others. Even a brief look shows that there is something seriously wrong amongst the male population. Nunavut's suicide rate is nearly six times the Canadian average (Ahluwalia 2000). One study shows that Inuit men aged 15 to 24 are *five* times more likely to commit suicide than women of the same age (Boothroyd *et al.* 2001: 749 and 752). The same report states that suicide rates are continuing to increase. In such a small population (approximately 29,000), everyone is affected—including hockey star Jordin Tootoo, whose brother committed suicide (Graves 2003), and Nunavut Premier Paul Okalik, who contemplated suicide in his youth after his brother killed himself (Ahluwalia 2000).

In Nunavut, although the secondary education graduation rate was only 31.6% for both genders in 1999/2000, it was 27% among men and 43%, much higher, among women (Statistics Canada 2003). The Government of Nunavut is the territory's largest employer, and at present, seven out of 10 government employees are women (Minogue 2005). Women thus form the overwhelming majority of the work force. In the 2001

national census, it was reported that Nunavummiut women earned \$974 more per year than other Canadian women and Nunavummiut men earned \$7099 less per year than other Canadian men (*ibid.*). In 1999, 38% of Inuit men and 33.3% of Inuit women were unemployed because of a lack of jobs (Government of Nunavut 1999: 14). These statistics show that Inuit women are better off than Inuit men in terms of education, employment, and economic levels.

Condon and Stern (1991: 387) found that Inuit girls seem to feel a stronger continuity between traditional and modern times in terms of the gender expectations imposed upon them and their daily tasks. Inuit boys, on the other hand, feel that they have fallen into an abyss between their traditional role as men and some kind of future self-definition. Condon and Stern (1991: 391) argue that while the woman's role has expanded, the man's role has diminished, leading to more leisure time, frustrations and stress among the male population. In traditional times, men were far more nomadic than women were. Men left the camps in search of game, while women remained to tend the household and children. When Inuit were forced to move into permanent settlements, it was difficult for men to reach their familiar hunting grounds. Also, many of the traditionally male tasks have been mechanised (*e.g.*, dog teaming was replaced with snowmobiling, iglu-building with pre-fabricated housing, etc.). With this mechanisation, hunting itself became an expense. Women therefore expanded their role from housekeepers to income generators so that they could subsidise their men in their traditional duties as providers of food (*ibid.*: 412-413) and men have become less busy while women have become more so.

When I asked my informants why they thought that there are fewer male high-school graduates, more male suicides, and dropping male employment in Nunavut, they invariably answered that men are less stable than women. Their answers corresponded to Condon and Stern's results. One male informant talked about the exaggerated disparity that young men feel between the Western way of life (and all the schooling and employment that it entails) and the traditional Inuit man's life spent on the land. The Western life seems to lie in the theoretical realm, while the traditional male lifestyle is much more tactile and pragmatic. To prove themselves as "real" Inuit men, many young men leave school in search of that practical and immediately applicable lifestyle. Many get lost in that search and, in the end, lose themselves, making suicide, substance abuse and other forms of abuse, such as physical and sexual violence, an easy alternative.

Despite what looks like a more favourable situation for women in Nunavut, and because the Western social infrastructure favours men, Inuit women have had to prove that female power does exist and that it is on par with male power. The next section discusses the accomplishments of making the Inuit women's voice heard.

### ***Inuit women organisations***

A brief analysis of three Inuit women organisations will show how integrated gender issues are in the Inuit women's perspective of power within Northern Canada.

These organisations are Pauktuutit, the Arnait Video, and the Qullit Council of the Status of Women.

Founded in 1984, Pauktuutit (named after the pegs used for stretching out skins, traditionally a woman's task) represents all Inuit women across Canada. It is mandated to achieve "greater awareness of the needs of Inuit women, and to encourage their participation in community, regional and national concerns in relation to social, cultural and economic development" (Pauktuutit 2004). It addresses women and children's health issues, family violence, child sexual abuse, addictions, suicide, residential school issues, traditional Inuit midwifery, economic development, and the need to protect individual and collective intellectual property rights. It also works on gaining better access to justice in remote communities and raising awareness on foetal alcohol spectrum disorder, sexually transmitted diseases and tobacco reduction (*ibid.*). Pauktuutit regards seeking women's equality as integral to addressing these issues. It sees Inuit women as "the vessels of culture, language, traditions, teaching and child rearing. Inuit women must take their rightful place as equals in the implementation of all self-governing arrangements and institutions" (*ibid.*). Pauktuutit has a grassroots approach to community empowerment, taking direction from women doing front-line work in the communities. Although only women are members, the issues Pauktuutit deals with concern the community as a whole. Pauktuutit is accomplishing change and progress at a fundamentally non-governmental level, and at the same time, it pushes for more inclusion of women's issues within the government.

Arnait Video is an Inuit women's video cooperative from Igloolik. It is an affiliate of Isuma Production, an independent Inuit-owned film production company, also based in Igloolik. Arnait ('women') Video was established in 1991 to produce, direct, write, film and act in docudramas and re-enactments that are "expression[s] of research into traditional and contemporary Inuit styles of narration" (Arnait Video 2004). Arnait Video explores topics such as traditional women's roles within society, pregnancy and birth, adoption, marriage and family, traditional healing, death and the interaction between generations of Inuit women. One of their most innovative projects has been "Live from the Tundra," which gave people around the world the opportunity to interact via the Internet with a family living in a remote outpost hunting camp. It was a powerful method of connecting the past with the present, and Inuit living in remote areas with the rest of the world. This small company seems to have found a way of overstepping the written word to emphasise the oral and visual culture of Inuit.

The Qullit Council of the Status of Women receives funding from the Government of Nunavut but is an arm's length organisation. *Qullit* is the plural form of the word for a stone lamp. Tended by women, it was the source of light and warmth inside traditional dwellings. The Qullit Council is based in Iqaluit and many of its activities occur there. It organises activities such as "Take Back the Night," a rally to make the lives of women and children safer in Nunavut. It is currently trying to recruit more council members in a push called the "Anaana Project" (*anaana* means "mother"). Each council member is "adopting" a community in Nunavut to find out about women's healing circles, sewing and crafts making, social work, and other activities. The women's pursuits in each community will then be brought under the

umbrella of the Qullit Council. This will allow women across Nunavut to network more easily and share best practices. It is a small organisation but is endeavouring to become more active on the Nunavut scene (Joyce Aylward, pers. comm. 2005).

### ***Nunavut Wildlife Management Board***

The next organisation I will discuss is the Nunavut Wildlife Management Board (NWMB), which in contrast to the aforementioned organisations is policy-driven. I use the NWMB as the closest example I could find of a territorial organisation that could be seen as an Inuit men's representative body, though they are not mandated as such. Hunters and trappers are integral parts of the NWMB, and most hunters and trappers are men, so perhaps the NWMB is where a man's cultural voice should be but is not. Hunters and trappers do not have the same avenues of expression that Inuit women have, except through a convoluted route of disconnected government agencies and social services (such as health, social assistance and the prison system).

The NWMB was established in 1993, as a part of the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement, in order to create a balance between the protection of Arctic wildlife and the cultural and physical needs of the people who live in the Arctic (Nunavut Wildlife Management Board 2004). It acts as a mediator between regional wildlife organisations and the hunters' and trappers' organisations, putting forth suggestions to the Nunavut government, which has ultimate control over wildlife decisions. In the words of White (2000: 90), the NWMB is an example of a "political compromise" between the indigenous people and governmental representatives (who may or may not be indigenous themselves). Men still hold the traditional role as hunters in Inuit communities, and therefore the NWMB acts as a mediator between men voicing their right to hunt and the government regulating that right. It is a necessary mechanism in the modern Arctic society, but it prevents Inuit men from governing themselves as they must continually prove that their hunting practices are acceptable.

The NWMB does not address any of the emotional, sociological or psychological stresses Inuit men face as hunters in a modern society. Whereas Pauktuutit is mandated to deal with Inuit women's perceptions of Inuit society, the NWMB is a purely political body that negotiates resource management. Inuit men do not have a formal means of addressing their successes or hardships as a collectivity. To make matters worse, there has been a forced devaluation of hunting as an occupation. While most Inuit families happily make arrangements for the men to hunt and provide healthy food for the family, many find themselves defending hunting as a legitimate "job." Minor (2002: 80) describes one woman who constantly has to tell her non-Inuit colleagues that her husband is fully occupied as a hunter and that he is not jobless. Indeed many of the youth I spoke to had internalised this idea that hunting is a leisure activity (see also Stern 2000). When I asked if their fathers were employed, many replied that their fathers were not—they *only* hunted.

To exemplify the sense of emotional alienation Inuit hunters face in society, I will recount what one of my informants told me about his father's situation as a hunter and trapper in the Baffin district of Nunavut. Pauloosie's (not his real name) family lived

on the land, travelling between outpost camps, until the early 1980s. His parents never attended formal schooling and are monolingual Inuktitut speakers. Since the family moved into the community, Pauloosie's mother has been able to secure stable employment as a seamstress and a worker at the fish plant. His father, on the other hand, has only ever found part-time seasonal work. Pauloosie thinks that his father is not doing well emotionally and psychologically. His knowledge and skills come from the land, and he cannot find the employment to apply them. Moreover, while Pauloosie's father can provide country food for his family, it costs money. Boats, outboard motors, skidoos, rifles and ammunition and fishing nets are expensive to buy and maintain. He cannot contribute to the economic stability of his family on a consistent basis. While there is a representative body that can mediate his concerns as a hunter engaged with the sustainable harvest of wildlife in the Arctic, there is no organisation that can speak for him as an Inuk man struggling to contribute to his family in a modern world.

### ***Inuit male leadership in the government***

Although Inuit men are suffering more than women on sociological, economical and psychological levels, they still garner far more representation in the Legislative Assembly of Nunavut. The other paradox is that despite the strong organisations Inuit women have working for their rights and needs, and the greater responsibility they take within the household and the monetary economy, their role in politics is smaller scale, more constrained and more informal than that of Inuit men (Reimer 1996). Indeed, only 10 women out of a total of 82 candidates ran for election to the legislature (Elections Nunavut 2004).

The cause of Inuit women under-representation in politics can be found in the historical changes that have affected Inuit gender roles. Minor (2002: 69-88) formulates that there are three phases to the exertion of authority in Inuit history: the traditional, transitional and contemporary phases. She argues that Inuit are in the midst of making a circle back to traditional equality. In traditional times, men and women were equal but different. In the early transitional times, Western forces reached out to men first, and so they participated in the new economy (through fur trade) and learned English before women did. They felt the greatest impact of cultural change but also were promoted to higher ranked jobs according to Western values. In the second half of the transitional period, women joined the Western work force, at first taking low-ranking jobs but then steadily taking more high-ranking positions. At the same time, men did not engage in the Western economy as greatly as they had previously. Minor states that this is because Inuit were beginning to turn away from the Euro-Canadian economic model and alter the traditional model to fit into contemporary times. I would argue that the Western economy was also turning away from Inuit men at this time, as Europe became zealously anti-fur. Inuit men were not able to sell skins from their hunting and trapping activities. The contemporary phase of Inuit authority is a time when men and women are looking for ways to express equality (*ibid.*). Although many of Minor's informants voted against gender parity in 1997, in 2001 many said that they would vote differently if they had another chance because they have had more time to think about

it and understand it better. Minor concludes by saying that as long as Inuit direct Nunavut, the trajectory of authority will point more towards gender equality.

As mentioned earlier, Lisa Young disagrees that society alone, without electoral reform, can fix the problem of low female representation in higher positions of government and authority. She states: "Few voters are aware of the extent to which, at a practical level, electoral systems shape electoral outcomes" (Nunavut Implementation Committee 1995: A-8.6). Jack Hicks (pers. comm. 2004) commented that while many Europeans understand that various electoral systems produce different representational effects, former British subjects—like the Inuit—have somehow been convinced that there is no other method of creating government except by single-member plurality or majority. He suggested that this is one of the successes of colonisation; the colonised believe that the system they have been forced into is the only one that exists.

### **Discussion: The future of gender parity in the Nunavut legislature**

When I spoke to my informants about the gender parity proposal of 1997, only one of the 10 had ever heard about it. Although at the time of my interviews, all of them had completed at least grade 12 and many were attending a college designed to teach Inuit youth about political history, none had any exposure to the issue and many were confused about the implications. While they all agreed that women and men should be equal, not everyone was quite sure whether this had been the case in the past. Few had ever thought about the low number of women that currently sit in the Nunavut legislature. When asked if something should be done about this, all said that women should be encouraged to participate in politics because of their strength within the communities. One remarked that it almost looked like a new "traditional" gender role was emerging: men go to Iqaluit to sit in the legislature, while women stay in the communities and work on issues from there.

When I asked them to tell me how the situation should be remedied, few had any idea of what to do. Although some thought that women should constitute 50% of the legislature as a matter of fairness and proper representation, they did not agree that gender parity was the way to do that. They thought that changes should be made within the society so that the legislature eventually reflects these changes. Two of my informants did believe that gender parity was a good idea. One equated the legislature to a symbol of the symbiosis within Inuit households. He said that Inuit women make important decisions within the family, and since families are a part of the community and communities are a part of Nunavut, women should be making important decisions about Nunavut.

As discussed earlier, the paradox of Inuit society is that Inuit men are suffering more than women, often resorting to suicide, substance abuse and the abuse of others, but women do not have the same level of representation in the government. There is a duplicity occurring, as though two people are sitting still on the bottom side of two different see-saws with the opposite sides of their see-saws empty and up in the air. If only they would decide to sit on the same see-saw, they could swing up and down and



balance together. This incongruity is a gap in communication between the government and the people it represents. The gap will not be filled until steps are taken to maintain a representational balance between men and women. Since Nunavummiut were willing to implement Article 23, it should not have been a stretch to implement equality between men and women.

While Inuit society may be circling back to traditional Inuit values of women's and men's work as a rejection of Western patriarchy, there will not be a reflection of this in the legislature because of the male-oriented nature of the Westminster style of government. In order to end on a positive note, however, Nunavut is still a very new concept. Nunavut as a public government is a means for Inuit to make decisions and effect change. If Inuit value the equality of men and women that has been continuous from the past, then they must be empowered to make that change in their government: there is still room for assessment and transformation.

### Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Dr. Lisa Young for teaching the most inspiring class of my undergraduate degree in Political Science. Her teachings continue to encourage me. *Mat'na!* I thank the staff and students of Nunavut Sivuniksavut, and Jack Hicks who provided me with so much insight. I would also like to thank Tunngasuvingat Inuit and Inuit Tapariit Kanatami for helping me find informants. *Qujannamiik!* My dear sister Beth housed and fed me while I conducted my interviews. *Quana!* My lovely *aapaa* Steve and my sweet *panik* Akutaq let me get away with not playing with them as I wrote, rewrote and rewrote some more. *Nakurmik!* My parents, Karla and Bob, have always taught, encouraged and challenged me. *Qujanarsuaq!*

### References

- AHLUWALIA, Raj  
2000 Suicide prevention still needed, *Sunday Report*, April 2, CBC-TV (broadcast transcript), CBC web site ([www.archives.cbc.ca](http://www.archives.cbc.ca)), consulted June 1, 2006.
- AMAGOALIK, John  
1997 My little corner of Canada, *Nunatsiaq News*, April 18: 9.
- ARNAIT VIDEO  
2004 Arnait Video web site ([www.isuma.ca](http://www.isuma.ca)), Isuma Distribution International, consulted March 7, 2004.
- ARREAK, Eva  
1997 Plebiscite on gender parity, *Sunday Report*, May 25, CBC-TV (broadcast transcript), CBC web site ([www.archives.cbc.ca](http://www.archives.cbc.ca)), consulted June 1, 2006.

BELL, Jim

- 2003 Ottawa must spend on training to comply with land claim, NTI says, *Nunatsiaq News*, January 31, Nunatsiaq News web site ([www.nunatsiaq.com](http://www.nunatsiaq.com)), consulted March 1, 2004.

BOOTHROYD, Lucy J., Laurence J. KIRMAYER, Sheila SPRENG, Michael MALUS, and Stephen HODGINS

- 2001 Completed suicides among Inuit of Northern Quebec, 1982-1996: A case-control study, *CMAJ: Canadian Medical Association Journal*, 165(6): 749-755.

BOURGEOIS, Annette

- 1997 Small turnout for Yes tour's Rankin stop, *Nunatsiaq News*, May 16, CBC web site ([www.archives.cbc.ca](http://www.archives.cbc.ca)), consulted June 1, 2006.

CONDON, Richard G. and Pamela R. STERN

- 1991 Gender preference, gender identity and gender socialization amongst contemporary Inuit youth, *Ethos*, 21(4): 384-416.

DAHL, Jens

- 1997 Gender parity in Nunavut? *Indigenous affairs*, July-December [electronic version], Copenhagen, Denmark, Arctic Circle Society of the University of Connecticut web site ([www.arcticcircle.uconn.edu/SEEJ/Nunavut/gender.html](http://www.arcticcircle.uconn.edu/SEEJ/Nunavut/gender.html)) consulted March 7, 2004: 1-5.

DORAIS, Louis-Jacques

- 1986 Agiter l'homme pour attraper la femme: la sémantique des sexes en langue inuit, *Études/Inuit/Studies*, 10(1-2): 171-178.

ELECTIONS NUNAVUT

- 2004 Elections Nunavut web site ([www.elections.nu.ca](http://www.elections.nu.ca)), consulted April 5, 2004.

GOMBAY, Nicole

- 2000 The politics of culture: Gender parity in the legislative assembly of Nunavut, *Études/Inuit/Studies*, 24(1): 125-148.

GOVERNMENT OF NUNAVUT

- 1999 *1999 Nunavut community labour force survey*, Iqaluit, Government of Nunavut.

GRAVES, Gary

- 2003 Profile: Who is Jordin Tootoo? *CBC News Online*, October 9, CBC web site ([www.cbc.ca](http://www.cbc.ca)).

GUEMPLE, Lee

- 1986 Men and women, husbands and wives: The role of gender in traditional Inuit society, *Études/Inuit/Studies*, 10(1-2): 9-24.

JESSEN WILLIAMSON, Karla

- 2000 Celestial and social families of the Inuit, in Ron Laliberte *et al.* (eds), *Expressions in Canadian native studies*, Saskatoon, University Extension Press: 125-146.

HILL, Miriam

- 2001 A seat of one's own, *Nunatsiak News*, November 9, Nunatsiak News web site ([www.nunatsiak.com](http://www.nunatsiak.com)), consulted June 1, 2006.

MAHONEY, Jill

- 2004 Gay rights dominate Nunavut campaign, *Globe and Mail*, March 5 Globe and Mail web site ([www.globeandmail.com](http://www.globeandmail.com)), consulted March 5, 2004.

MINOGUE, Sara

- 2005 Two girls for every boy at the GN, *Nunatsiak News*, May 27 Nunatsiak News web site ([www.nunatsiak.com](http://www.nunatsiak.com)), consulted June 1, 2006.

MINOR, Tina

- 2002 Political participating of Inuit women in the government of Nunavut, *Wicazo Sa Review*, 17(1): 65-90.

#### NUNAVUT IMPLEMENTATION COMMISSION

- 1994 *Two-member constituencies and gender equality: A 'made in Nunavut' solution for an effective and representative legislature*, discussion paper, Iqaluit, Nunavut Implementation Commission, 19 pages.

#### NUNAVUT LAND CLAIMS AGREEMENT

- 1993 Agreement between the Inuit of the Nunavut settlement area and Her Majesty the Queen in right of Canada [electronic version], Nunavut Tunngavik web site ([www.tunngavik.com](http://www.tunngavik.com)), consulted May 21, 2006.

#### NUNAVUT TUNNGAVIK INCORPORATED

- 2004 *Tukisittiarniqsaujumaviit: A plain language guide to the Nunavut land claims agreement*, Ottawa, St. Joseph Print Group.

#### NUNAVUT WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT BOARD

- 2004 Nunavut Wildlife Management Board web site ([www.nwmb.com](http://www.nwmb.com)), consulted March 6, 2004.

NUTTALL, Mark

- 1992 *Arctic homeland: Kinship, community and development in Northwest Greenland*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press.

#### PAUKTUUTIT

- 2004 Pauktuutit web site ([www.pauktuutit.ca](http://www.pauktuutit.ca)), consulted March 6, 2004.

PHILLIPS, Todd

1997 Gender parity backers plan campaign strategy, *Nunatsiaq News*, March 7, Nunatsiaq News website ([www.nunatsiaq.com](http://www.nunatsiaq.com)), consulted June 1, 2006.

REIMER, Gwen D.

1996 Female consciousness: An interpretation of interviews with Inuit women, *Études/Inuit/Studies*, 20(2): 77-100.

ROJAS, Aluki

2000 *A reinterpretation of the position of Inuit women*, M.A. thesis, Trent University, Peterborough.

STATISTICS CANADA

2003 *The Daily*, November 18, 2003, Secondary school graduates survey, Statistics Canada Web site ([www.statscan.gc.ca](http://www.statscan.gc.ca)), consulted March 7, 2004.

STERN, Pamela

2000 Subsistence: Work and leisure manipulation, *Études/Inuit/Studies*, 24(1): 9-24.

STEWART, Henry

2002 Kipituituq in Netsilik society: Changing patterns of gender and patterns of changing gender, in Lisa Frink, Rita S. Shepard and Gregory A. Reinhardt (eds.), *Many faces of gender roles and relationships through time in indigenous northern communities*: 13-26.

WHITE, Graham

2000 And now for something completely Northern: Institutions of governance in the territorial North, *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 35(4): 80-90.

YOUNG, Lisa

1997 Gender equal legislatures: Evaluating the proposed Nunavut electoral system, *Canadian Public Policy*, 23(3): 306-315.